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ACTION AND HUMAN NEEDS: An Outline of Moral Evaluation

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
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The undersigned certify that they have read,  
and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for  
acceptance, a thesis entitled ACTION AND HUMAN NEEDS:  
An Outline of Moral Evaluation, submitted by Douglas  
M.Hendrickson in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts.







## ABSTRACT

Our brief outline of moral evaluation begins with a consideration of action. Movement is action because of its contextual significance; for purposes of moral evaluation intentions are irrelevant. Furthermore, what are often referred to as consequences are in fact features of the action itself. In order to evaluatively isolate the dynamics of action we introduce the concept 'action-situation' as the position of an agent in the world. This we come to see is action, and for an agent's position to change is not for him to act, but to act differently than before.

We approach the desirable via desires, and find that as far as it goes the ethical views of Charles Stevenson are defensible. However, we propose to advance beyond them to bridge the fact/value 'gap'. In that one necessarily desires that something be the case, the contrast between 'emotive' and 'cognitive' is rejected. A belief in the desirability of some state of affairs is the basis of any desire. Moreover, since to see something as desirable is to desire that it be the case, an agent's moral conclusions about what is most desirable necessarily coincide with his action as he sees it.

Further, it is argued that if one understands what it is for anything to be desirable, one's moral evaluation will concentrate on the elucidation of possible need-sat-





isfaction. The sole criterion of value is human need. Actions (states of the world constituted by the position of particular agents) are to be assessed in terms of their total need-satisfaction, which is contrasted with both the needs and the desires of the agent himself. Action is never morally neutral, for it is either satisfying needs, or failing to do so.

Principles and claims of various sorts are considered, and their use accepted insofar as they help one pinpoint features of an action-situation. How well they indicate the actual satisfactoriness of any particular action is not determinable by rules, however; they must be applied. The task of moral evaluation is to understand how they apply - how the needs of an action-situation can best be satisfied with the resources available. Restricted forms of evaluation such as that of a doctor (who determines medical needs) are contrasted with moral conclusions.

Finally, the social complex involved in need-satisfaction is indicated, and the way in which one augments human ability and thus satisfies needs - that needs may be satisfied. Individual satisfaction or human fulfillment is found to be identical with acting in the best manner possible, this being defined by the need-structure of one's action-situations.





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To pursue what one believes to be evil  
rather than what is good is not in  
human nature.

Plato - Protagoras

More things will be produced and the work  
be more easily and better done, when every  
man is set free from all other occupations  
to do, at the right time, the one thing  
for which he is naturally fitted.

Plato - Republic

Insofar as this thesis is something to be thankful  
for, I wish to thank all those who played whatever part  
they did in making it what it is.





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## I. Agents and Situations

Men act, and in so doing build a human world.

Action presupposes an agent who performs the action; in our concern with moral evaluation we shall limit the agents under consideration to human beings. Also, 'agent' as employed in our analysis may in fact be a plurality acting in concert. Human agency is involved in almost infinite possibilities; through technology we are not only able to but actually do extend our control to cover in some manner virtually every aspect of the world. The choices are immense, although those of any individual agent may in fact be quite limited.

Men do things, and their doing of them implies that they have the power to do things. In fact, the power to act is always used, though not always recognized. Merely by virtue of being alive men occupy a position in relation to other men and the world. To be alive is to be doing something, even though when asked what he is doing a man may reply 'Nothing'. To be doing 'nothing' is to be engaged in a more passive activity, such as sitting or sleeping.

It is not the case that active doing is better or more desirable than passive doing, for rest may be more essential to an agent's continued existence than any other action. In many cases to do 'nothing' is to remain a sha-



dow of what one might have been, but to be something, to be great, is not necessarily to be good. Napoleon is an object lesson here. One is known by what one does.

## ACTION - SITUATIONS

Moral evaluation is concerned with the relationship of human beings to the world, to their environment. On the one hand we have the agent, whose actions are in question; on the other we have the context in which these actions occur. Any human agent invariably occupies some position in relation to that which is other than himself. A change in this position brought about by movement of the agent is commonly thought of as action.

How can we deal with this change? Its focal point is the agent's movement; the change is from one bodily position to another. If action is this change itself, then to adequately deal with the action, we need to be concerned with the nature of the two positions involved. And action is the difference of these positions. 'What should A do?' is then viewed as 'How should A act differently from the way he is now acting?'.

This action is more than mere movement, in that it cannot be entirely understood in physiological terms. Social, economic, political, and various other kinds of relationships will be involved as well, for the living human being must necessarily be related to that which





provides for sustaining his life. He lives not in a vacuum, but in a world which sustains him, and which he plays a part in sustaining. Men are necessarily involved in the world as part of the world. Bodily position has significance as defined by the manifold relationships it partially constitutes - as part of the context, part of the whole.

This involvement of the agent in the world we shall emphasize by referring to the locus of their intersection as an 'action-situation'. An action-situation is the position of an agent, his total relatedness to that which is other than himself. It is not to be confused with his point of view, insofar as 'point of view' involves his understanding, his merely contingent awareness of what his action-situation in fact is. What it is is the total state of affairs which centers about the agent, having his body as that to which all else relates, and in terms of which everything is understood.

An action-situation as the confrontation between a particular man (or group of men) and the world, is the focus of any assessment as to what it is best for this agent to do. Inquiry concerning the direction of action, what is to be done, how life is to be lived, can only make sense as springing from such a confrontation. This sort of inquiry is of the utmost human importance; its features are what we are concerned with in this essay. I shall claim that this inquiry is properly termed moral evaluation. The





assessment of an action-situation by the agent himself is clearly a special case of moral evaluation; any rational being can, with greater or lesser prowess, evaluate any action-situation.

It is then in terms of action-situations that we require moral conclusions. The moral question is, 'Given the action-situation of agent A at time  $t$ , which of all possible action-situations is the best?' Since the agent is invariably occupying an action-situation, the question may always be raised as 'Is this action-situation the best possible one?'. The task of moral evaluation is to provide answers for these questions.

In that an agent always occupies an action-situation, he is always 'doing' something. To be doing nothing is to be no longer an agent; it would be to have no definite, recognizable position in the world. But if to be doing something is to be acting, then one is constantly acting, and action is not limited to a change of position. In fact, the difference between two positions is then not action, but the way in which one action differs from another. Moral evaluation can only deal with positions, with the static, isolated relationships of a dynamic process. Assessment can involve comparison of these positions, in terms of both their differences and their common features. Hence the analysis of action is invariably the analysis of action-situations.



An action-situation is the position of an agent in relation to the world; it is what he is doing. One may identify this total relatedness as his action. But this position at the same time involves possibilities for change, for the establishment of new or other action-situations than the one presently lived. The actualities of an action situation determine precisely what is possible therein, determine, that is, what sort of action various bodily movements will be. Since these actualities change with a changing world, the actions which it is possible for a particular agent to perform change as well. The language used to indicate these possible actions, the way they are described, depicts what can be done by him, and thus constitutes a sine qua non of moral evaluation. It allows for a recognition of change, and at the same time a questioning of it. One is able to isolate moments from any part of the temporal spectrum and relate them to others, without actually living them. This power of abstraction allows for the evaluation of action through a comparison of action situations. That is, we view the change or modification of the world which an action is as the creation of a new world, a new action-situation or state of affairs.

Although it would seem that any person not completely paralyzed is almost constantly shifting his position, much of this change is of minimal significance, since it only very slightly affects the context or 'other'. Strict-





ly speaking, all bodily movement has some significance in terms of being at least a very minimal modification of that nexus of relationships which is the world. But in practical terms moral evaluation concerns itself with distinguishing positions which differ from others in fairly consequential ways. Usually the actions we are concerned with are quite obviously important alternatives, though details of their several natures may only dimly be seen. If they were not important, it would not be important to consider them. In an attempt to apprehend the value of an action-situation, we consider the various positions to which it is a significant alternative at the time of their possible enactment, and this time may be of considerable length. Hence for practical purposes an action-situation continues to be the same action-situation until the agent whose action-situation it is transforms it by taking up a position with new alternatives for action quite different from those of the former action-situation. This same action-situation is itself constantly being transformed by forces other than that of the agent.

It may be thought that we could simply speak in terms of 'situation', but this is too vague to insure that the point of agency is the focus of attention. And 'agent situation' might be misleading as well, since it could be confused with 'point of view', where this is understood as the particular awareness possessed by the agent in question. An action-situation is not a point of view in the





unique possession of one man, but human agency in its actual relatedness to the rest of the world. Any determination of how best to act (without qualification) involves determining that some state of affairs centered about the position of an agent is better than all other possible states of affairs would severally be, were they brought about by some other exercise of primary ability open to the agent at that particular time. These possible states of affairs which the movement of a particular agent is capable of bringing into being we shall refer to as the possibilities of an action-situation. To establish any one of them is to annihilate the former action-situation having them as its possibilities, and to erect a new action situation toward which moral evaluation is also appropriately directed.

## INTENTION

Thus far in our considerations of action we have not mentioned intentions. Intentions may be important for the explanation of why what is done is done, rather than something else. In this sense they are closely associated with motivation<sup>1</sup>, which we shall briefly consider

1. "We should say: popularly, 'motive for an action' has a rather wider and more diverse application than 'intention with which the action was done'.", and "I call a motive forward-looking if it is an intention." G.E.M. Anscombe, Intention (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press), 1963. Pp. 19&21.



later (p.34ff.). Our concern with action, however, is not to explain it, but to evaluate it. The value of what is done, or what may be done, depends upon the actual nature of action-situations, and is independent of what the agent may intend to do even as it is independent of his particular awareness. That is, an agent's understanding of an action-situation and his intentions associated therewith occupy no special place for purposes of correctly understanding the value of what is actually done, or not done.

This does not mean that intentions are to be excluded from our account, for they are in fact features of action-situations. Some actions are unsuccessful attempts, and must be understood as such. It may, however, be best that an agent does not succeed in doing some particular thing, i.e., that he acts contrary to his intention. It is the nature of what he does or fails to do that has value, and not what he thinks he does or thinks he ought to do. These thoughts may themselves be assessed to determine their value (as motivating forces, for instance), but they do not by any means make the action-situation an action-situation - they are not its essence.

To say that what is done by the insane, by infants and children, by epileptics during fits, by branches against windows or rain on asphalt, is not really action, seems rather silly. It may be convenient, when writing at some length about action which is done by agents who are appropriately the subject of blame and punishment, to merely





refer to 'action', but the writer should resist the temptation to treat his favorite type of action as all action, through a convenient neglect of the qualifications. Is it not liable to be misleading to insist that something is not action when what one means is that it is not responsible action? Is it not liable to be misleading to insist that the epileptic did not act when in fact he acted involuntarily, and that is what one means? We are here quite able to draw the necessary distinctions using familiar concepts, so to use 'action' in an unfamiliar or technical way is to distort it and possibly our understanding as well. It does not aid our understanding of 'action' to identify it with playing correctly some particular 'game'.<sup>1</sup>

Intentions bear a merely contingent relationship to what is done (and hence a merely contingent relationship to moral evaluation) since what is done may be quite unintended. The same is true of responsibility and freedom; what is done irresponsibly or unfreely is still done. Even as an

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1. This is particularly directed at A.I. Melden, who wants to limit 'action' to rule circumscribed activity. He is correct in seeing that context is what gives movement the significance of action, but wrong to limit the context to established practices which he thinks convey responsibility. A.I. Melden, "Action", in Essays in Philosophical Psychology. Edited by Donald F. Gustafson. (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday), 1964, pp. 58-76. For more about established practices, vide our arguments against Rawls, p. 62ff.



agent may or may not intend to do what he does, he may or may not do it freely and responsibly. We are concerned with the nature of what is done, not with whether it is done under duress, by accident, without regard, and so on. These are the sort of things it may be important to know for purposes of ascribing praise or blame to an agent, for purposes of distributing rewards or punishments.

The correctness of action, the felicity of action situations, however, is quite another matter. Value can be determined only on the basis of the agent's position as compared with other ways he could relate to the world. If his actions are completely determined by forces other than himself, they nevertheless constitute definite action-situations which can be valuationally compared with at the very least preceeding and subsequent action-situations. Under such conditions the value of moral evaluation would be much less than we suppose it to be; our considerations of the relation of desire to action in Chapter II suggest that these conditions do not pertain to conscious beings. In any case, our concern is with explicating the logic of moral evaluation, regardless of its application. Ours is, as it were, pure research rather than applied science.





## CONSEQUENCES

It is fairly commonplace to distinguish between actions and their consequences. We are inclined to view features of an action, especially features temporally distant from the moment at which a particular position upon which we focus our attention is initiated, as not part of the action itself, but as consequences of action. The question then is, how do we determine where the action ends and the consequences begin? Is the crucial point where movement of the agent's body stops and something else moved by or because of that movement begins its consequential motion? This will not do, however, for what we are then referring to is not the consequence of action, but of movement. If a context upon which the agent acts is necessary for the very idea of action to make sense, we cannot then view the modification of this context as something quite other than the action, for to do so is once again to isolate the movement (bodily position) as action from any significance it would otherwise have for the organism that moves or the environment it moves in. The action would be insignificant, and the consequences could not even be said to be consequences of it. That is, there could be no consequences.

The entire significance of particular bodily movements may be virtually impossible to predict in practice; action is revealed through time, and in this sense con-



sequences of movement that are temporally proximate to that movement determine what further consequences will be. We should not be misled by the use of 'determine' here, for these intermediaries could be considered to be simply along for the ride. At any rate, it is convenient and understandable to refer to the more distant consequences as consequences of the proximate ones - that is, of the so called 'action' which the proximate ones are.

However, all 'consequences' are essentially the action. Although conceptually separable from each other, they remain features of a positional whole. Action is mis-interpreted if we elevate immediate consequences of bodily movement to a privileged position as 'action', at the expense of other aspects of that which the movement accomplishes or is. An agent at any particular time is performing one action which may in fact be more or less complex. The various features of its complexity may be referred to separately, but are in their totality the action itself, and therefore misleadingly contrasted with more immediate 'action'. As already noted in our preliminary considerations of action-situations, the unique matrix of relatedness which constitutes an agent's action must for practical purposes be considered to continue for some time, and during this time and even after new action has been initiated, the full extent of an action continues to reveal itself in its manifold inter-action with the environ-





ment into which it is 'dropped', like a pebble into a pond. To act is to make the world forever different from what it would have been had one acted otherwise. The action does not cause this difference; the action is this difference.

If any action is entirely actual 'consequences', the essence of action - what makes movement action - cannot be intended consequences. As we have already argued, intentions are not essential features of action, but may be important for understanding why actions occur. "Moral terms like 'right' and 'wrong'", to use Welden's phrase,<sup>1</sup> are appropriately applied to something which we do, although we may not in fact intend to do it. To have stayed home from a picnic which was rained out anyway, may be the best or right thing to have done, even though one only stayed home because one's car would not start. An action is what it is, and this is what we must evaluate.

Although it is of the essence of living things that they be intentional or purposive, it is not of the essence of an action that it be an intended action. We can allow that the concept of action essentially involves the concept of the aim or end of movement, i.e., that bodily movement is not understood except in terms of its end - the

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1. Op.cit., p.58.



direction it has.<sup>1</sup> If, on the other hand, 'intentionality' is used to focus on the agent as dissociated from a particular context or situation, then it is a form of self denial or contradiction which will necessarily fail to locate that end which its enthusiastic employment is designed to emphasize.

Anscombe notes that many ancient and medieval philosophers express this enthusiasm for 'ends in view' which agents must have.<sup>2</sup> She asks: "Can't a man just do what he does, a great deal of the time?"<sup>3</sup> A somewhat facetious reply would be that a man always just does what he does,

Whether he has a reason or purpose for doing what he does, and whether he must have such, is of course the question being raised. Anscombe interestingly observes that "the term 'intentional' has reference to a form of description of events."<sup>4</sup> The way an action is viewed or described, the way a whole sequence of movement consequences is conceptually united as an action-situation, in short, the descriptions used to indicate what is done -

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1. It is precisely this 'intention' which moral evaluation is concerned to bring into conformity with the truly desirable (that which is most to be desired, most worthy of desire). Cf. Chapter II, below.

2. Op.cit., p.33ff.

3. Ibid., p.34.

4. Ibid., p.84.





these determine whether or not talk of reasons and purposes is in order. Which is to say, if we choose to see action in terms of means and ends at all, then ends are involved. This itself seems a rather trivial revelation, but the point to be brought out is that there is a choice to be made between seeing what is done as one action (one action-situation), or viewing each of the consequences of movement (bodily position) as a separate action, all being related as a series of means except the end term of the series. Our view is that to choose the latter is to involve oneself in artificial and misleading fragmentation.

## DESCRIPTIONS

We are coming to see, then, that the way in which we describe what is done is of crucial importance for our understanding of action. As Melden says: "It is important to notice that how we shall justify or condemn an action will depend upon the character of the description given of it, i.e., upon what it is that the action is taken to be."<sup>1</sup> He goes on to prescribe that we

... regard alternative descriptions of an action as alternative accounts of what the action is. Here we must resist the temptation to look upon one

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1. A.I. Melden, Rights and Right Conduct (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), 1959. P. 63.



account ... as the true and proper account of the action per se, to seek for what might be called the lowest common denominator in the series of possible descriptions of an action and to view the subsequent members of the series of descriptions as merely introducing additional factors that need to be 'tacked on' to the first and 'proper' account given.<sup>1</sup>

Is it not possible that we will best be able to "resist the temptation to look upon one account ... as the true and proper account of the action per se", if we do not regard the various partial descriptions as alternative accounts? That is, they are not alternatives at all, but each illuminates one aspect of what is done. The aspects are not alternatives, but all stand together as the whole significance of an agent's movement. Together they constitute the nature of his action.

The question as to whether there is one action or many is an interesting one. Anscombe considers a particular example and concludes

In short, the only distinct action of his that is in question is this one, A. For moving his arm up and down with his fingers round the pump handle is, in these circumstances, operating the pump; and, in these circumstances, it is replenishing the house water-supply; and, in these circumstances, it is poisoning the household.

So there is one action with four descriptions, each dependent on wider circumstances, and each related to the next as description of means to end; which means that we can speak equally well of four corresponding intentions, or of one intention - the last term that we have brought in in the series.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid., p. 68.

2. G.E.M. Anscombe, op.cit., p. 46.





As she also points out, all descriptions except that of the bodily movement per se are dependent upon 'the only distinct action' described in terms of bodily movement. Without the movement there would be no action of any kind to describe.

If an action is what it is in terms of the position of an agent in the world, then any description of an action is in fact a description of this position (or changed position). The position which one occupies in the world, the situation in which one finds oneself, consists of an indefinitely large number of relationships with the entities that constitute the world. Any particular agent is related to all existing things in some manner or other. Descriptions which can legitimately (truthfully) be applied to an action-situation, to an agent's action or position in the world, are those which express some aspect of its total relatedness to the world in which it is embedded.

Each action is in fact the introduction of a new state of affairs or nexus of relationships. These relations may be very complex; they are accounted for descriptively by factual assertions. 'Relation' is used here in a very broad way, such that any factual claim about the action in question is included. This means that not only positive statements about a changed situation contribute to the complete description of an action, but negative claims as well. Feeding a child may be not to feed oneself. And not to build a house. And not to tie one's shoe. That is,



what a body movement fails to be or is not in terms of the situation in which it occurs is also part of the action which it is. To understand an action fully we must understand what it might have been and even what it could never have been. Which is to say that the complete description of an action would be a description of the world.

Are we now transgressing plain common sense even to the point of admitting no distinction between an action and the world? Not really, for many actions other than the one under consideration are to be found in the world (and also understood in terms of the world). To give any description of an action, it is necessary that our attention be centered about a particular movement of a particular agent. Or more precisely, we must focus upon his position. Otherwise there would be no way of identifying the agent - or the action! Hence, any complete description of an action is the world as understood in terms of an agent's position, i.e., with it as the focus of attention. This does not mean that the result will be a distorted understanding of the world, but that the account of an action is a understanding of the world.

Our understanding, of course, is never complete, but this does not mean that we do not understand. We can quite easily be aware of important features which distin-





guish one action from another. To signal someone is not to lay down and go to sleep, unless that is the signal. To do so may also be to signal the stopping of a train. It may also be to initiate 'The Great Train Robbery'. It may also be a releasing of men to plunder and kill. Or it may be none of these things. Any action is many things, and there are even more things that it is not.



## II. Desires and Needs

### THE DESIRED

To desire is to desire something. There is always an object of desire. However, as Anthony Kenny has illustrated in fairly great detail, ' "A wants X" does not report a relation between A and some entity wanted. Wanting is always wanting to get X; and a description of getting X describes a state of affairs and not a thing.'<sup>1</sup> To desire is therefore to desire that something be the case, and the object of desire can always be expressed by a that clause, though this may not be its most natural expression. As Kenny points out, 'The proliferation of different constructions after affective verbs in English can hardly be of logical importance ...'<sup>2</sup> To illustrate the logic of wants we shall employ this one format to which all descriptions of desires may be converted.

A desire, that is, is never of some thing in itself, but always that the thing have some particular relationship, often to oneself. One does not simply desire Brigitte Bardot, or Ivory soap, or roast beef, but that Brigitte

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1. Action, Emotion, and Will (London, 1963), p. 206.

2. Ibid., p. 214.





Bardot be near one's side (in a manner of speaking), that Ivory soap be in one's hands, and that roast beef be on one's plate. One must mean this sort of thing when making statements like 'I want X' or 'I desire X'. Two criteria also advanced by Kenny are another way of expressing this feature of desire: to desire a tangible object X a man must be able to tell 'what counts as getting X' and what he wants X for.<sup>1</sup>

The use of 'getting' in the first of these two criteria is unfortunate in that it prejudices the issue of whether one can want what one already has. Of course, this is deliberate, since Kenny quite explicitly claims that 'what is wanted must not be already in the w~~an~~ter's power.'<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, he has to account for any use of 'want' in this context as wanting to keep what one has;<sup>3</sup> whereas, one may in fact not want to keep what one has, but merely want to have it for the moment. The thing in question, the state of affairs, may be desired even when it is the case - and precisely because it is not something to be maintained. The desire to have cold ice cream in one's dish is an example.<sup>4</sup> Although I certainly desire to keep my head (ie., continue to possess it), I also desire to have it about me at all times. No getting is involved here, even though

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1. Ibid., p. 115.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., footnote, p. 116.

4. One can have one's ice cream and eat it too (eg., one can have it for lunch), but one cannot keep one's ice cream and eat it too.



Anscombe may be correct in insisting that 'The primitive sign of wanting is trying to get.'<sup>1</sup> It may be that enjoying can be apprehended even in the case of animals by some other (occurrent) signs, and these would be signs of wanting which do not involve trying to get. However, we shall not here consider the dispositional question; the reader is merely referred to Gilbert Ryle<sup>2</sup>, and P.H. Nowell-Smith.<sup>3</sup>

Wanting X, on the present view, is not wanting to get X, but wanting to have X. It is wanting the state of affairs where X is the case. And this, as Anscombe insists, most certainly does involve 'knowledge (or at least opinion) that the thing is there.'<sup>4</sup> There must be an awareness that the state of affairs is somehow possible - that it is 'there', at least potentially.<sup>5</sup> Her other condition - movement towards this thing (ie., state of affairs on our view) - must either be rejected or interpreted rather broadly. In the latter case, to 'move toward' would include affirming or holding to that which is present when one wants things to be as they are.

It is not non-sensical or even out of the ordinary to want to have things as they are, to desire that things

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1. Op. cit., p. 68. Italics mine.

2. The Concept of Mind (London, 1949), esp. ch. V.

3. Ethics (Harmondsworth, 1954), p. 125ff.

4. Op.cit., p. 68 ff.

5. This understanding precludes Anscombe's concern with denoting phrases (Intention, p.69), though it may raise problems about the existence of possibilities.





be as they are. Unlike Kenny, we do not follow Aquinas in saying 'that a desire which did not precede its object would not be a desire ...'<sup>1</sup> An object of desire, that is, can quite well be contemporaneous with the desire itself. What lovers in each other's arms would then not want to be there? One supposes quite the opposite is normally the case. Anscombe, in her restrictions on that which can be the object of desire, finds she must allow the inclusion of present objects as well as future objects and future states of affairs.<sup>2</sup> But as Kenny has shown, these 'objects' are not in fact different in principle from states of affairs.

Since we can want to have things as they are, we can be doing what we want to be doing. Kenny admits there is a sense in which this is so, but claims it is 'not directly connected with desire.'<sup>3</sup> He says this 'will be considered later', which I assume has reference to his considerations of enjoyment and/or pleasure. But is there anything in the nature of enjoyment which would preclude wanting to do that which one is enjoying? Or wanting to have something be the case when one is finding great pleasure in knowing or experiencing that it is the case? I think not. Pleasure may not be directly connected with

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1. Kenny, op.cit., p. 116.

2. Intention, p. 67.

3. Op. cit., footnote, p. 120.



desire (though I think it is), but wanting to do what one is doing certainly is. The object desired is the activity being done, or more precisely, that it be done. There seems to be no basis for an asymmetry here between desiring that what is being done be done, and desiring that what is being done not be done. An object of desire is not like an object of memory in being necessarily temporally remote from that of which it is an object.<sup>1</sup>

## THE DESIRABLE

We shall take it as analytically true that to desire something is to see that something as desirable. To consider something as being desirable is to desire it. This must of course be an active, occurrent consideration, an aspect of one's present awareness, and not merely the fact that in reply to a query we would admit that Brigitte Bardot is a desirable woman. It would seem possible to consider her desirable and yet not actively desire her. But this, it turns out, is not to actually consider her desirability or the supposed fact that she is desirable.

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1. In passing, we might suggest that what are referred to as emotions are desires or clusters of desires of generally greater duration and intensity (passion!) than those we do not characterize as emotions. The desire (to escape danger as in fear, for example) may be so intense that physiological effects become noticeable. An emotive fixation on some state of affairs may affect one's total awareness so as to be what Jean-Paul Sartre calls a magical transformation of the world.  
The Emotions: Outline of a Theory (New York, 1948), p. 58.





It is merely to have a disposition to affirm that she is desirable.

But if I do affirm that something is desirable, am I then desiring it? As we have seen in our consideration of the objects of desire, to desire something is to desire that a particular state of affairs be the case. On the other hand, if a desirability claim is made, if I affirm that something is desirable, then what I am saying is that a particular state of affairs is desirable - that it should be the case. That is, I desire that it be the case.

It does not seem likely that that which in principle cannot be an object of desire could nevertheless be desirable. In fact, it just does not make sense to suppose that something is desirable but never to be desired. So things per se (which cannot be the object of desire), are not good or bad - they possess no value qualities. This means that not only is any idea of intrinsic value logically incoherent, but that all ethical concern is moral evaluation. What is desirable, good, or bad, can only be states of affairs, and these in their entirety (ie., as they are) are none other than action-situations, or what is the same, actions.<sup>1</sup> They are the world of human agency.

To actually think something is desirable and yet

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1. Cf. p.18, where we noted that concern about actions must be in terms of states of affairs.



not at the same time desire it is not conceivable. It is a contradiction of terms, that is, to not desire that which one believes is desirable. The truth of any act utilitarianism is that one should always act so as to produce the greatest balance of good over evil. This is not some principle whose merits one might dispute, but a logical truism. To argue otherwise, as some deontologists do, is to desire evil in the place of good. And this desire is not only morally perverse; it amounts to seeing as desirable that self-same state of affairs one sees as undesirable - a contradiction of terms. Logically, to believe something is desirable is to desire it. Alternatively, to desire something is to believe that it is desirable. If the belief is held for an extended period of time, then so is the desire. And both are held in the same manner - which may be only as a disposition to act, verbally or otherwise.

If this is so, then there is a logical connection between desire and belief. We recall at this point Anscombe's insistence that knowledge or at least opinion is a feature of desire. We also recall the need which Kenny finds for treating the object of desire as a 'that' clause or sentence radical. But Anscombe's relating of desire to action in terms of requiring a 'desirability characterization' to explain the latter is most interesting. She says 'all that is required for our concept of wanting is that a man should see what he wants under the aspect of some good.' 'Good',



that is, 'is the object of wanting'.<sup>1</sup> In other words, what is desired is what we see as desirable. To clarify this: 'the notion of "good" that has to be introduced in an account of wanting is not that of what is really good but of what the agent conceives to be good.'<sup>2</sup>

Anscombe is wrong, however, to limit the criteria for a desirability characterization to mere intelligibility.<sup>3</sup> That is, we must go beyond an acceptance of actual desires (she refers to them as aims - would we be wrong in calling them intentions?). Although further inquiry into the nature of value may not be her concern, she does not therefore gain the right to refer to the questioning of ends, whether they be health or pleasure or anything else, as being without sense.<sup>4</sup>

Anscombe draws a misleading analogy between truth as the object of judgment, and good as the object of wanting.<sup>5</sup> For if desirability or goodness is what we attribute to that which is desired by virtue of the very fact that it is desired, then the question of whether this attribution is in fact correct is in order. We do not wish to make the mistake of Mill who claims that the only basis for ascer-

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1. Intention, p. 76. The first quote is from p. 75.

2. Op.cit., p. 76.

3. Ibid., p. 75.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p. 76.





taining what is desirable is to discover what people do in fact desire. How close Anscombe comes to this position I'm not sure; it tends to be beyond her area of concern. The important thing is that we avoid Mill's fallacy.<sup>1</sup>

If our view is correct, then desire involves a judgment every bit as much as any supposedly non-affective claim about the way things are. It involves, it is a judgment as to what is desirable. Unless we concede some sort of moral nihilism, it must always be in order to question the truth of this judgment. The basis for the determination of this truth and hence what is in fact desirable, what state of affairs is good, we shall explicate below (p. 44ff.). It is there that we will develop the basis for questioning the validity of men's desires.

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1. Mill is by no means alone in this confusion. <sup>Bethrand</sup> Russell in Human Society in Ethics and Politics <sup>(1918, 1942)</sup> identifies desires or enjoyment as the basis of value: 'A right act is one which aims at the greatest possible satisfaction of the desires of sentient beings.' (p. 72) Westermarck and other sociological-anthropological positivists tend also to define values in terms of commonly accepted opinion. Stevenson and Melden are more recent theorists who perhaps escape the fallacy by allowing for corrective modifications of prescription and practice, but even they seem to lack any grounds for determining whether the change is in fact preferable (as opposed to merely being preferred). Stevenson seems most consistent by virtue of removing from his analysis of the use of moral terms all reference to actions or things being actually desirable or good. What we require from moral philosophy is some measure which shows when desires and practices coincide with what is most desirable and practicable. Human needs, we will attempt to show, provide just such a measure.



## MOTIVATION

That desires be the subject of critical scrutiny is important in view of their logical connection with action. To see something as desirable implies that one is at least likely to do what is in one's power to make it recur, ensure its continuance, or newly bring it into being. In Aristotle's terms, "the good" is that at which all things aim.<sup>1</sup> It is a state of affairs that is the 'object' of desire, and not merely a thing; this means that connections exist between a present state of affairs and the desired state of affairs, such that if certain agents carry out certain actions, there will be an increased likelihood of that desired state coming into existence, or remaining in existence.

Even so, Alan White, for instance, has cautioned against identifying desires and motives. On his view motives are a species of explanation, but one with which desires have a logical relation. 'Whenever it can be said that someone acted from such and such motive, it can also be said that he wanted so and so.'<sup>2</sup> Motives would seem to be desires utilized in the explanation of action: '... to refer to the motive is to indicate the desire for the sake of which something is done ...'<sup>3</sup> This would perhaps read

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1. Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. 1, ch. 1.

2. The Philosophy of Mind (New York, 1967), p. 141.

3. Ibid., p. 165.





better with 'desire' replaced by 'object of desire'.

Kenny, in his account of motives, fills out this schema somewhat. 'One motive differs from another in accordance with the different types of undesirability which can be attributed to the pre-action state of affairs, and the different types of desirability which can be attributed to the post-action state of affairs.'<sup>1</sup> There is, that is, a pattern of desires involved, and not simply one. It follows that motives as represented by a name remain rather vague until the whole pattern is elucidated. In any case, we are not concerned with the explanation of why or how actions occur, but with how one is able to ascertain their value so as to know the best way to act.

## APPROVAL

Desire, it would seem, is neutral enough to include both desirability (seeing as desirable) and undesirability (seeing as undesirable). We need not contrast desire with aversion, say, for attributions of undesirability can be properly understood in terms of desiring that a particular state of affairs not be the case. Even this negative is not always necessary; one can desire that a stinking pig be chased away even as one might desire that the incense continue burning.

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1. Action, Emotion, and Will, p. 92.



We see that affirmations and denials, pro and con attitudes, are an intrinsic part of desire. In fact, to approve of something (state of affairs) is to desire that it be the case. To disapprove is to desire that it not be the case. And vice versa. Now, since to see something as desirable is to desire it, we have the basis for Charles Stevenson's ethical position. The claim 'X is good' is the same as 'X is desirable' and logically implies that he who sincerely makes the claim desires that X be the case, i.e., approves of X. And if others agree, if they see X in the same way as he does, as desirable, then they too approve of X.

It follows that if our analysis is correct, then Stevenson's is correct too, as far as it goes. It may even be preferable to those which go farther, but along a contradictory path.<sup>1</sup> At any rate, it seems to be the case that we can reject his account only in terms of insufficiency, and only do that when a consistent further development goes beyond emotivism. And the required development must not leave any logical gaps between that which is truly desirable and that which happens to be desired, other than that due to a purely contingent lack of knowledge. This knowledge gap would necessarily be a partial or inadequate understanding of that which is the case. That is, if we

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1. Cf. footnote, p. 28.



wish to get beyond Stevenson, beyond subjective states of mind, our analysis must construct a bridge that takes us beyond, that takes us beyond desires to a reality which is desirable regardless of whether or not it happens to be desired or approved of. Our task is nothing less than bridging the conceptual abyss between values and facts.

In a sense, our analysis is ready to carry us beyond Stevenson, for we have emphasized that a desire is not merely an attitude, but itself involves a belief as well. That is, to desire something is not merely to approve of it, but in the case of action, to believe that it is a desirable thing to do. The desirable is not merely what is desired (à la Mill, or restricted to individuals), but what is to be desired. So to desire something is to believe that it is to be desired. One cannot, that is, desire what one believes to be undesirable. If I say 'I desire that undesirable X' I must be equivocating in the use of 'desire' and its cognates. To avoid begging the real question, however, we have yet to show how it is that when we approve of something we are not merely indicating our personal approval either in itself or for purposes of influencing the desires of others. We must, that is, provide criteria with which we can at least theoretically settle any questions concerning the truth of a particular moral claim<sup>1</sup> before we will in fact supersede a purely emotive view.

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1. Cf. note 1, p. 33.





## CONFLICTS

Our analysis of desire, particularly as it relates to moral evaluation, would not be sufficiently complete without noting that desires are a very mixed phenomenon. This is not merely a reference to our old point that any state of affairs for which we can indicate what would count as having it, and what we want to have it for, is a possible object of desire. The more troublesome complexity arises when a number of these possible desires are present during the same period of time.

Various courses of action may be seen to be desirable for various reasons. This brings us back to the possibilities of an action situation. Any possible course of action (and some that are in fact not possible)<sup>2</sup> may be seen to be desirable. That is, many actions may be desired when only one of the many can be done. The strength of these various desires need not be identical either; were they

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1. Or whether there are moral claims at all. <sup>Charles</sup> Stevenson speaks of analyzing judgments, but in so doing he must be using 'judgment' as a purely grammatical description. Ethics and Language (New Haven, 1944).
  2. Actually, this contingency should not arise if we adequately understand action as it occurs in specific action-situations. To focus upon bodily movements as that which has significance as action is to minimize error as to what is primarily possible, though one may easily be mistaken about what an action is in detail.



necessarily of equal intensity moral evaluation and perhaps even action would be highly unlikely. As it is, we can desire one thing more than another, and these desired states of affairs may or may not be mutually exclusive.

The fact of contradictory desires pinpoints the need for moral evaluation. We clearly must and do act - all the time! Hence we must resolve conflicts of desire, and this, as even <sup>desires</sup> Stevenson insists,<sup>1</sup> is simply not just a matter of discovering what we all along desire most. The question competing desires raise is, contrary to Stevenson, whether or not a dominant desire actually indicates that which is most desirable. It does not have the field all to itself, and hence must allow that others may have possession of the ball as well. And unlike football, to engage in moral evaluation is to look beyond one team, to look beyond both teams, to attempt to see what is desirable in terms of the whole field.

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1. Facts and Values, p. 64 ff. It seems that on Stevenson's view clarity of attitudes comes about through their expression, which demands a consistent pattern of supporting beliefs. We take exception to this distinction between attitudes and beliefs; an attitude simply is a belief about the desirability of something being a certain way. Thus for beliefs to 'mediate between an individual's attitudes' (p. 66) is for some further belief to aid in the resolution of a conflict of beliefs. On his view, these mediators indicate reasons or grounds which the person has to desire one thing rather than another, and not why some state of affairs is in fact more desirable. To express beliefs may indeed help to clarify them; the crucial expression is of course action that constitutes a resolution of conflicting desires.





To want something is to think it right that that something be the case. And vice versa. We cannot, that is, think some course of action (the erecting of a certain state of affairs) is right, and not desire that it be the case. It may be suggested that often we do not want to do what we know we ought to do. However, if  $X$  is truly desirable, and we know it to be desirable (clearly the former is a necessary, though not sufficient, precondition for the latter), then the knowing involved must constitute a form of desire. What causes the confusion here is the fact that to see something as desirable is not necessarily to see it as totally desirable. And there may be perfectly good grounds for not doing so. A particular action may be desirable for one reason, and not desirable for yet another. So we can want the particular state of affairs to be the case (ie., concede that the action ought to be performed) and at the same time see it as undesirable, but of course for different reasons. It is, or so it seems, both desirable and undesirable. The action both ought to be done, and ought not to be done, if one identifies a desirable action with what ought to be done, and also considers an undesirable action as one which ought not to be done.

The aim of moral evaluation is to resolve contradictions or uncertainties of this sort, by determining which of all possible actions is the most desirable. Is the inescapability of such conflicts what accounts for



St. Paul's dilemma: 'The good which I want to do, I do not do' (Rom.vii,19)? In <sup>A.M.</sup>Hare's terminology, 'It is a tautology to say that we cannot sincerely assent to a command addressed to ourselves, and at the same time not perform it, if now is the occasion for performing it, and it is in our (physical and psychological) power to do so.'<sup>1</sup> The answer to our question is quite simply 'Yes'. It is logically impossible under these conditions for the object of one's desire not to be an actual state of affairs. The desire we are now referring to corresponds to our action because its object, of all those desired, is most desired. Again, we desire many things (states of affairs), but at the time of its doing that which is done must, by virtue of what it is to desire, be most desired by the agent. This is assuming he does what he believes he is doing.

St. Paul is talking about good intentions; the reason the road to Hell is paved with them is that they arise from hypothetical or abstract moral evaluation done in advance of the action-situation involved, and hence without full knowledge of the nature of an intended state of affairs. If Hell is the actual end of our 'good' intentions, then perhaps we had better avoid being mesmerized by the principles we tend to aim at invariably fulfilling.

In a very real sense, hypothetical moral evaluation

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1. Freedom and Reason (London, 1963), p. 79.



is not moral evaluation at all. That is, it's a contradiction of terms. One might think one were giving an example of moral evaluation, but in fact one would be doing no more than advancing certain principles.<sup>1</sup> Their application to action-situations which are not hypothetically restricted would still remain as the task of moral evaluation. Features common to a number of hypothetical situations may of course be explicated so as to display the nature of their commonness, but any particular action situation (ie., any action-situation!) still requires analysis to determine whether it shares the same commonness. If it does, then the principle derived from or based on this commonness (Hare calls it universality) must be assessed vis-à-vis the action-situation to determine the extent to which it correctly indicates the best possible

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1. This is a contradiction some act-utilitarians involve themselves in when they consider extreme 'situations' as examples of the failure of specific principles. In reference to a dispute (that actually split some Baptist churches) concerning whether or not 'It is wrong to lie' applies absolutely to all instances of lying, including the case where savages who have killed four of a man's five children ask him if he has any more children, Henlee Barnette notes that

Situation ethicists would, in the above situation, hold that the most loving act would be to lie and save the life of the child. Hence, the moral decision is determined before the ethical problem arises, a flat contradiction of their contention that prior moral decisions must not be made until the existential situation presents itself.

(The Situation Ethics Debate, ed. by Harvey Cox, (Philadelphia, 1968), p. 137) Nowell-Smith is also illuminating in this respect when he rejects 'desert island' situations as artificially lacking a proper context in which principles could be meaningful in the way they actually are. Op.cit., p.239 ff.





state of affairs.

The conclusion that hypothetical reasoning cannot be moral reasoning, in the sense in which the latter is directed toward the determination of the best possible state of affairs in a given action-situation, is reinforced by our conclusions concerning the relation of desire to action. If any agent A necessarily desires to do, and most desires to do, that which he thinks he is in fact doing, then no desirability characterization held by A prior to the time of action is logically related to that action. The antecedent moral conclusion bears no necessary relationship to the action actually undertaken, unless it can be shown that changes of desire, of one's awareness, develop according to a logic of their own and not in response to one's changing action-situation. The final and hence crucial evaluation of human action occurs at the time of action, ie., whenever one is conscious.<sup>1</sup> If any evaluative conclusion plays a role in the actual directing of action, it is that state of affairs which the agent sees as most desirable (ie., desires to have as his transformed action-situation) at the very moment of action.

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1. This I think indicates the basis for whatever truth is involved in the radical view of freedom advanced by Jean-Paul Sartre in Being and Nothingness, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, 1956).



## VALUE

In chapter I we unfolded some of the features of action which show the need for moral evaluation - the point of its application. Our understanding of desire so far indicates even more strongly not only the need for moral evaluation, but the seeming impossibility of avoiding it if we are at all aware of action in its temporal dimension. We must now turn to a consideration of why and how moral evaluation is possible in terms of the objective basis which exists as the grounds for any valid moral conclusion. What, that is, must we know in order that our desire have as its object the truly desirable?

The continued existence of any organism is, as we have noted, dependent upon the relationship it has with its environment. For it to be the organism which it is, there are therefore certain actions or action-situations which are more necessary than other. Its welfare is vitally dependent upon its responses; some are more valuable to it than others. It makes a difference for the organism (qua organism that it is) whether its energy is consumed in one way rather than another. Although its primary





ability would allow for the expenditure of this energy in various bodily movements, these may be more or less satisfactory in terms of the necessity noted above. That is, corresponding to the necessity for an action is a need which will thereby be satisfied. The satisfaction or satisfactoriness of the action, the need or that which is necessary, and the necessity or value of the action which satisfies this need, are identical. All are of the same degree and constitute one aspect of a particular action. The same action, the same movement or exercise of primary ability within a specific context, may be valuable in other ways as well - it may satisfy other needs as well. Or what is the same, it may be desirable for yet other reasons.

The other needs which an action satisfies or fails to satisfy, may be needs of an organism other than the agent whose position in the world is the action-situation being evaluated. For this reason, the value of an action cannot be completely apprehended in terms of the agent's needs alone. Value is based upon and determined by need-satisfaction, and not merely by the need-satisfaction structure of some particular person. Agents may be more aware of their own needs than those of others (though it is by no means obvious that awareness is invariably influenced in this way), but it is need-satisfaction and not awareness of need that is the source of value.



An action-situation, as we already indicated, is not a particular point of view. An action-situation is not an agent's awareness, but the lived reality that is present, and therefore of which he may be aware. Any particular agent will in fact be more or less but never entirely aware of his action-situation, of his action. Man is finite; his capacity for understanding is not infinite. Hence knowledge is never absolute. Although organisms other than men may be agents, it seems clear that their capacity for understanding the dynamics of action is even more severely restricted, if it exists at all. We, in any case, are primarily concerned with the evaluation of human actions.

## HUMAN NEEDS

If need-satisfaction is the only source of value, can there be any objective basis (ie., any basis) for discrimination by men in favor of human needs at the expense of those of animals. Charlie, the family poodle, needs water (in order to survive) every bit as much as Uncle Charlie, another favorite of the family. Yet were they both stranded in the desert, in most cases the dog would be the first to go: as they say, 'It's a dog's life.' This discrepancy in favor of human need would be even more obvious in the case of a wild rabbit, which, in seeking water, mistook the man for a mirage, especially if Uncle



Charlie happened to be hungry as well as thirsty. What accounts for this assumed difference of value? If our view is correct, the only possible validity this sort of discrimination can have must itself be a matter of need. Perhaps the primitive necessity for survival simply demands that a human agent, who is more able to be aware of how to survive, and hence better equipped to do so (other things being equal - which they never are), will therefore act so as to survive, at whatever the cost. Even if this be so, this demand is not always met. Self-sacrifice, even for animals, is not unknown.

Although we may consider laying down our life for a friend, or for 'humanity', as of great value, we tend to condemn as irrational an action of self-sacrifice which does not contribute to the betterment of mankind. I think the answer to our present dilemma, the reason why this condemnation occurs, is that we as human beings, as live human beings, would have to go outside the state of being alive or of being human in order to raise the needs of another species above our own. Being human, we cannot view the world and life in other than human terms, so to place a pet's life above our own would necessarily be to treat that non-human as a human being. This failure to discriminate where a difference actually exists constitutes a moral error, though one we can sympathize with.

If this primacy of human values or needs is ines-





capable and hence justified, is there not a similar primacy of race, nation, family, or even oneself? Must one not, on pain of being irrational, view the world in terms of one's own race's needs having a special position of dominance over those of others? And even more so, one's individual needs? Various responses are possible to this seemingly abhorrent suggestion. One of these would please Thrasymachus: many of our needs (in his case desires) are only capable of satisfaction through social interaction, so we must tolerate others and use them as best we can.

Unless similarly infected with a Nietzschean passion, however, we do not feel comfortable with this conclusion. It is not sufficient. We may say that we need, for the sake of general human welfare, for the welfare of all, to avoid such discrimination. And this need is greater than whatever need there may be for the discriminatory actions themselves. All men, even Thrasymachus, have need for insuring that their own life is not nasty, brutish, and short. Hence the war of every man against every man must be rejected in favor of a social contract, a general willingness of all to give their power to one man. What Hobbesian irony it is that in order to avoid the alternative of Thrasymachus, men must give up all power to another without even the slightest dissent!

We need not take this course, however, to find an



adequate solution to our problem.<sup>1</sup> The analogy between species differentiation and racial or other forms of differentiation breaks down at a crucial point. There are no needs peculiar to black men qua black, but only needs of oppressed, hungry, ignorant, or infirm human beings. That is, within the bounds of possible human needs, there are no necessary connections between color of skin (or even the proper nouns and pronouns applied to individual skins) and the needs of men. To take adequate account of the needs of other men we do not have to treat them as identical with ourselves in anything but our common humanity. On the other hand, animal needs cannot be understood except in terms of human purposes.<sup>2</sup> Color and place of birth do not present the same logical barriers to understanding that species differences do. The former are not organic differences that necessarily entail a different type of position vis a vis the world. In short, the action-situation of a dog is not, nor could it be, comparable to that of a human being, whereas all men share comparable action-situations by virtue of their comparable (bodily) nature.

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1. The social problem of political freedom is not our concern here.
  2. Strictly speaking, animals have no needs, but only present desires to be immediately met or thwarted. This, however, if it is true at all, would only be so from the point of view of the animal. We must allow that all organisms have needs, and if they have desires as well, these must be coinciding with their needs.





Of course, there are physiological differences even among men. There are, it might be said, women and children. There are also immense environmental differences. But the point to note here is that although human needs may differ somewhat for these and other reasons, we can in principle be fully aware of these differences as human differences. There is no insuperable difficulty in understanding the needs of another man as well or better than he understands them himself. Differences of human need or value are that which it is the job of moral evaluation to sort out. And because each man, though human, is nevertheless unique, his needs are never precisely those of any other man. We need not worry, therefore, about having to choose between the satisfaction of two identical needs,<sup>1</sup> and hence need no principle, such as that favoring fatherland, with which to decide. If place of origin aided in the decision it would only be because one's fatherland was a feature of the action-situation all along.

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1. Actually, by virtue of the identity of indiscernibles, this is never a possibility anyway. Numerical difference per se is not an intelligible idea; there would not be any alternative to choose in the case of identical needs. Any Buridan's Ass situation is therefore by definition not a situation of choice.



### III. Principles and Claims

#### CLARITY ABOUT COMPLEXITY

Let us investigate in more detail what it is to be a feature of an action-situation. If an action-situation is an agent's position in the world, then features thereof are the relations which constitute this position and this world. For instance, the factual nature of an agent's fatherland and the factual relation it has to the agent (ie., that it is his fatherland), are invariably features of his action-situation. Any fact about the nature of the world as it relates to the position of an agent is a feature of his action-situation.

To act is to affirm through one's bodily position (ie., through one's position) a particular set of these relational features. The features may of course be temporally distant from the initial taking up of the position; movements of one's mouth and vocal chords which constitute the making of a marriage vow have a significance far beyond the mere utterance of some words. Therefore, if the action-situation can be considered to be static at the time of movement, at the time of the taking up of a new position, it nevertheless dynamically unfolds as the action itself becomes manifest. The action-situation changes as already noted, but remains the same action-situation throughout this unfolding of what a movement actually is.



What a movement actually is, what its significance is, may be only dimly seen at the time of its inauguration, but through changes of an action-situation this nature may become more evident.

On the other hand, the actual nature of an action may not become more evident over time, because of the many modifications of an action-situation wrought by factors (including agents) other than the agent in question. The complex interplay of actions make moral evaluation difficult, and for this very reason, necessary. Were everything about an action obvious, there would be no need for moral evaluation. Anyone with dogmatic certainty about how best to act in fact treats action-situations as obvious, and sees no need for moral evaluation.

The claim that moral evaluation is no more than an attempt to become clear about the actual nature of an action or action-situation is based upon the fact that needs, which constitute the sole grounds for any possible appraisal of value, are every bit as much features of the action situation as anything else. We can no more reasonably argue that human beings don't have needs than we can argue that they don't have hair on their heads (excepting those who don't, of course). The person suffering from diabetes quite simply needs insulin. And if there is any question about this particular need, we consult the expert, the man who knows, in order that we might know more fully what the particular need is and hence what is necessary or valuable





for its satisfaction. We consult, in this case, a doctor. Needs are not by any means limited to food, clothing, and shelter. If one can take the word of a distinguished psychologist,

There is not a person ... to whom it would occur to question the statement that we "need" iodine or vitamin C. I remind you that the evidence that we need love is of exactly the same type.<sup>1</sup>

When the person engaged in moral evaluation comes to understand the nature of one specific need of an action situation, his objective is far from accomplished. This objective, we recall, is to determine which course of action on the part of a particular agent (which may be a group of people) is the best course of action. What is best or most valuable can only be understood in terms of the needs of the action-situation in their entirety; an action satisfying one need (i.e., eliminating it as a need) will always be of some value, but it will not necessarily be the most valuable action possible. Since the most valuable action is the most satisfactory one, it is that action which best satisfies the total needs of an action situation.

These needs, however, are ultimately the needs of the world, since an action-situation is the position of an

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1. Abraham Maslow, 'Deficiency Motivation and Growth Motivation', in Theories of Motivation in Personality and Social Psychology, ed. Teevan & Birney (Princeton, 1964), p. 116.



agent in the world and must therefore include both the agent and the world in which he is situated. Having found that human concern is necessarily anthropocentric, we must affirm that the needs of the world are the needs of all men. They are the necessities of human life. Human welfare is the ultimate determinant of human action; the needs of men take precedence over those of cancer cells, rats, etc. Often other organisms contribute to the well-being of men, but when they threaten to do otherwise, we quite rightly attempt to exercise dominance over them for our own good. When this human control is based on extensive knowledge and hence sound moral judgment, far from being evil, it promotes the elimination of evil. Men, in their finite wisdom, determine what life is to be promoted, and in what way. This is what moral evaluation is all about.

We must not be taken to be suggesting that the aim of moral evaluation is the miraculous or any sort of impossibility. Quite clearly (and probably fortunately), no single agent has it within his power to satisfy all human needs, all the needs of the world. But if he can act at all, he has it within his power to satisfy some. Hence action is never morally neutral, for it is either satisfying needs, or failing to do so. The latter is obviously a case of wrong action, a bad exercise of primary ability. The former may be wrong in a final or decisive sense, in that it is not the most satisfactory or best action possible.





## INDIVIDUAL CLAIMS

An instance where this latter wrongness is likely to be involved is where an agent insist either in word or deed that the satisfaction of his needs takes precedence over those of other men, simply by virtue of being his needs. As the words of his claim indicate, he has no basis for making it, unless the claim is meant as an empirical judgment of how he in fact acts. Beyond human need there is no criterion for the determination of right and wrong (or good and bad, since all four terms and their cognates can only refer to states of affairs - vide p.18 & 25 - and states of affairs can only have value by virtue of their need-satisfaction). Any grounds the agent might rely on to justify his egocentric position could equally be used by another to deny that position.<sup>1</sup> That is, they would not be grounds for it at all, but merely arbitrary.

It is clearly possible to distinguish one man's needs (at least some of them) from those of another, but it is quite simply not more necessary to satisfy them unless they are greater, unless their satisfaction is indeed more necessary. An action which seems to best satisfy the agent's needs alone may fall far short of being

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1. Eg., 'His needs should be met last, because they are his needs.'



the most satisfactory. It may fall far short, that is, of being that agent's most satisfactory or best action. The goodness or value of his action is not solely determined by what is good or valuable for him, for he is not alone in the world, and therefore is not the sole source of value. Beyond human need there is no appeal; the welfare of men is the ultimate determinant of all value. On the other hand, if a man is capable of meeting only his own needs and not those of another, then of course his best action will involve meeting only his own needs. This is not only unlikely, but also unfortunate, since it would involve a serious limitation on the value of any action he might undertake.

In the satisfaction of human needs we have then a criterion for sorting out those various claims which describe and attempt to promote or denigrate the various specific possibilities of an action-situation. More than that, we have the criterion, not merely one of a number of equally plausible ones. If we truly want to establish the best course of action, then we must look for that action which is the most necessary, the most needed, the most satisfactory. To achieve this end is to correctly understand the action-situation, understand what its needs are and how they may be satisfied with the resources available. This knowledge is crucial for the goodness of action; hence the importance of moral evaluation.



The necessities of action-situations appear to be of two types: needs, and non-need necessities. That is, we can speak of needs which it is necessary to satisfy for the maintenance and growth of human life, and other relationships which define the possibilities of an action-situation. It is within these boundaries that one must act, and it is necessary to act in certain ways rather than others if human requirements are to be met. It would seem to be the case that we can isolate things like food, clothing, and shelter (necessities of the first variety) from the ways in which these can be procured (necessities of the second variety).

But this is not the case. Food, clothing, and shelter, not to mention less obvious needs, do not exist independently of the possibilities for their appropriation and use. It would be an odd sort of costume indeed that could never be worn, or food that was incapable of being eaten. This does not mean that eating this food would provide an unbearably exotic sensation, or that the clothes would be even too outlandish to wear to a masquerade. The very idea of eating or wearing has no connection here; such 'need-satisfaction' would seem most unnecessary.

The distinction under consideration is a typical means/ends one. It is, moreover, identical with the relationship of action to the consequences of action, and as we have already seen, this is a completely spurious





distinction. Even as an action is entirely actual 'consequences'<sup>1</sup>, an end is nothing other than the complete process which brings about a particular state of affairs.

An 'end', that is, is entirely actual 'means'. We do not move our arm in order to feed ourselves, but in moving our arm actually feed ourselves. We do not stop Hitler in order to make the world free of a certain kind of tyranny, but the stopping of Hitler (invading Europe, etc.) itself is the establishment of this freedom.

## PRINCIPLES

The means/end distinction does, all the same, have a certain currency due to the inadequacies of human knowledge. Absolute certainty is not attainable so in its place we construct ideals and grope towards them as best we can. Good intentions stand in for more complete moral evaluation. This, I submit, is the reason for moral principles. Seemingly absolute claims substitute for absolute knowledge.

Just what are we doing in the employment of moral principles? Is their use a form of moral evaluation, an

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1. This means of course that there is no place for dispute as to 'whether the rightness of an action depends solely on its consequences or not'. (In the words of A.C. Ewing, Ethics<sup>(London, 1958)</sup>, p. 9) The rightness of an action depends upon the nature of the action, and that is that.



aspect of moral evaluation, or not moral evaluation at all? We have already considered St. Paul's 'good' intentions (vide p. 41) as an example of some difficulties encountered in the use of principles. That moral principles are abstract we also see from our means/ends considerations above. In all cases of their employment they therefore require application to action-situations. If we distinguish this application from the principles themselves (due to their essentially abstract nature, we cannot but do so), we discover that they are incapable of entirely taking the place of moral evaluation, since some form of evaluation, however inadequate, is required for any application whatsoever. The principle must somehow be related to (i.e., seen in relation to) an action possibility. To apply a principle is to attribute value (or its absence) to an action.

G.P. Henderson, in a splendid article just published,<sup>1</sup> argues that rules are of little importance with respect to moral concerns. Since it is the case that all principles are rules, although it is not necessarily the case that all rules are principles, we note that

For a rule to apply definitely to certain circumstances, what the circumstances require for their completion, fulfilment, alteration or resolution will already be clear, and the basis for a pragmatic moral development of them be laid. It is not that in such a development we dispense with rules of all kinds. That which circumstances require has to be assessed in terms of a knowledge,

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1. 'Moral Pragmatism', Philosophy, XLIV (1969), pp. 1-11.





more or less exact, what benefits of one kind and another are likely to result from what kind of action.<sup>1</sup>

Henderson may be partly mistaken if he means that all the needs of an action-situation will be clear prior to understanding that one rule applies. But if he means by 'definitely' the exact import of its application, not merely that it applies (he mentions 'unambiguously' in the sentence before), then we must agree. If one has unapplied principles (i.e., principles), then at least a great deal of the evaluative work still remains to be done.

If, as suggested above, principles are ideals toward which we grope, ends which we pursue, then this very pursuit would constitute their application. Now, any application of principles in the directing of action involves either a denigration or promotion of some particular action(s). Does the opposite hold, does any denigration or promotion of a particular action constitute the employment of a principle? Does moral evaluation invariably involve the use of principles? If by 'principle' we mean moral claim, then clearly it does, for at the very least the conclusion of moral evaluation consists of a moral claim concerning how best to act.

But is not a principle itself a moral conclusion about how best to act? 'It is wrong to steal' or 'One ought not to steal' is usually advanced not merely as an

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1. Ibid., p. 10.



illustration of some aspect of an action-situation and therefore deserving as much consideration as any other, but as a decisive criterion for action. The advocacy of moral principles is not an obvious attempt to aid one's understanding of an action-situation, and hence one's understanding of the needs thereof. But it may be so, nevertheless. If it is not such an attempt, then it involves prejudging the manner in which needs are best to be met.

Exhaustive moral evaluation would question any supposedly applicable moral principles. Principles, however, are not designed to be questioned, but to be followed. Nevertheless, the manner of their application is always questionable, and as Henderson indicates, certainty here requires knowing just what an action-situation is and hence what its requirements are. The question is not only one of whether they apply or not, but in the case where more than one is applicable, whether they are consistent with each other. Conflicts of principle can arise, and quite clearly many of the worst human disasters have been of this form. Were principles sufficient substitute for moral evaluation, or in themselves an adequate form of moral evaluation, we would expect them to be capable of resolving such conflicts short of the use of force. Wars provide strong evidence against the consistency of principles, and thus against their possession of the truth required for moral knowledge.



Principles may of course be at least partially consistent, such that a number of them constitute the manifestation of a (ideal) way of life. Or alternatively, a way of life may be the manifestation of principles. The contours which delineate the structures of possible social forms are law-like, and may be more or less codified as state laws. Writ large, most of these are rather obvious requirements for social harmony, and being obvious, explicit reference to them is of little moral value. Whether obvious or not, if adherence to principles is understood as merely agreement with particular 'ought' assertions, then reference to principles can be positively misleading. This is because in practice what is meant by these forms of words on which there is apparent agreement may be quite different. Again, the manner of their application is crucial; it is fine to know that some abstract form of action (or non-action) is desirable, but the problem remains of determining what, for particular agents confronted with definite action-situation possibilities, is the most desirable course of action or achievable state of affairs.

More than that, it is always questionable whether that which is depicted as desirable is in fact desirable at all. This applies to principles as well as to more specific claims. Ideals can be a form of 'death wish'; we might refer to Nazi ideals concerning the German state and the Jewish people as just that. Also, the aims of a





society may be no more desirable than its achievements. Societies both grow and decay; their aims may be both constructive and destructive.

If correct action is solely determined by adherence to principles, and many in the past have understood it this way, then differences of principle between societies and even generations within the 'same' society call into question the very idea of moral truth or correct action. Hence the so-called 'relativity of morals'. The truth of moral relativity is that what is best is always what is best in a given action-situation. It is quite wrong, however, to conclude from this or from the inconsistency of principles that no course of action is any better than any other, where this 'better' is not merely 'said to be better', but 'actually better' in that the action is in fact more satisfactory.

As should be evident by now, principles, whether adhered to in the form of custom or purely ideal, are not the foundation of value, though they may themselves be well founded. Or they may not be well founded. This latter fact has in our own time been strongly attested to by the proceedings at Nuremberg. One of the Nazis tried for war crimes is reported to have said: 'Well, we did our duty and it doesn't matter if we do get hung.'<sup>1</sup> In saying this,

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1. G.M. Gilbert, Nuremberg Diary (New York, 1965), p. 251.



he reflected all that is pernicious about reliance on principles. Even as rough guidelines, principles are the beginning and not the end of moral evaluation, and it is important to bear in mind that these guidelines themselves may be utterly misleading for the determination of how best to act. Even so, principles are useful in that they are extensively used<sup>1</sup> - even at Nuremberg. How to use them is the crucial question for moral evaluation.

#### PRINCIPLES: ROSS & HARE

This question of the role of principles in moral evaluation is not easily answered; the difficulty one encounters in knowing what is being referred to by 'principles' plays no small part in this central issue. W.D. Ross, in his concern with 'What Makes Right Acts Right', gives us a list of prima facie duties, the truth of which we supposedly intuit.<sup>2</sup> A.C. Ewing is in sympathy with Ross's view, but has to admit that it 'just leaves us with a heap of unconnected and underived prima facie duties.'<sup>3</sup> John Hospers as well claims that

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1. Hare (Language of Morals, <sup>(London, 1952)</sup> p. 60) gives three reasons for their use. It seems that to choose certain 'effects' (i.e., features of an action) is to already act on principle. To act in terms of knowledge of the future (prediction) and in order to teach practical affairs, such as driving a car, are the other reasons suggested.
  2. The Right and the Good (London, 1930), p. 21.
  3. Ethics (London, 1953), p. 81.





Ross gives no reasons why a certain type of suggested prima facie duty should or should not be included on his list...., no criteria are given for the inclusion or exclusion of candidates for the position of prima facie duty.<sup>1</sup>

This does not seem quite fair to Ross, for he claims

There is nothing arbitrary about these prima facie duties. Each rests on a definite circumstance which cannot seriously be held to be without moral significance.<sup>2</sup>

But if this does count as a reason or criterion, it is a very poor one, since it is virtually unhelpful. The whole question is 'What is, in fact, morally significant?'. At least, that is the question Ewing and Hospers would like to see answered here. But perhaps that question cannot be answered here - perhaps principles decide nothing concerning moral significance. And they have so little power to do so precisely because Ross is correct, precisely because they are self-evident or obvious and merely assumed by all 'serious' people.

Let us look at another contemporary writer who relies heavily on the use of principles. R.M. Hare makes a distinction between two types of principles, a distinction not unlike that of John Rawls<sup>3</sup> between those which justify a practice and those which justify a particular

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1. Human Conduct: An Introduction to the Problems of Ethics (New York, 1961), pp. 105-6.

2. Ross, op. cit., p.20.

3. 'Two Concepts of Rules', The Philosophical Review 64, (1955), pp. 3-32.



action falling under it. The demarcation is roughly one between ends of action which indicate why it is done, and rules of thumb which demonstrate what is done.<sup>1</sup> It seems that for Hare only the former are moral rules. However, in his emphasis upon universalizability as the sole criterion for rules to be moral, he demonstrates the triviality of the distinction even as we have argued that it is entirely artificial. All actual value judgments about the correctness of action in Hare's view are 'decisions of principle':

To ask whether I ought to do A in these circumstances is (to borrow Kantian language with a small though important modification) to ask whether or not I will that doing A in such circumstances should become a universal law.<sup>2</sup>

But as Hegel argued against Kant, circumstances can be specified in sufficient detail that for them to recur is impossible (assuming that time-machines are an impossibility), and hence anything can be 'justified' in this manner. If any characterization of the value of action qualifies as a principle, then although they may not be self-evident in the manner required by Ross, principles or 'duties' fail nevertheless to settle any matters of moral significance.

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1. Hare, R.M., The Language of Morals, p. 66ff.

2. Ibid., p. 70.



## RAWLS' RULES

A matter of moral significance is the breaking of a promise. This is a real possibility of any action-situation which includes a promise yet unfulfilled by the agent. How does one determine in the case of any actual promise whether it decisively ought to be kept? This is an important moral question that promises raise.

Rawls<sup>1</sup> does not agree that this is a moral question, possessing implications beyond the practice of promise making and keeping. This practice, he insists, forbids raising the general question of whether or not a particular action which constitutes the breaking of a promise is 'best on the whole'. Any action of this sort is to be defended only in terms of the practice - not in terms of an appeal beyond it. Rawls emphasizes that only because it is possible to know in advance of an utterance that it will or will not count as a promise, is it possible to make a promise at all. This is what he means by the logical priority of the practice. It cannot be determined whether a particular utterance is a legitimate promise (duty) unless there is the practice of promising. The practice, and only the prior existence of the practice, can qualify the utterance as a promise. But this logical priority only counts

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1. Op. cit.





in terms of the justification of an action qua promise. The question we are raising is whether one morally ought to break a particular promise, given that it constitutes a real obligation. That is, one is presupposing, and not calling into question, the 'game' of promising. One is not, that is, taking one alternative which Rawls allows - that of the reformer.

Someone who swore an oath of allegiance to Hitler (or anyone) and later committed treason would not necessarily be seeking to reform the practice of promising. And yet, to justify his action it would be entirely beside the point to claim that his promise did not really engender an obligation after all. If treasonable action were justified, and even lauded, it would not be because the agent realized he was not really under an obligation by virtue of his oath, and even less that he had become aware of what, within the context of Nazi practices, was an allowable defense against the keeping of a promise.

One might praise the breaking of a promise as 'courageous' precisely because it is to not fulfill a particular duty. The duty remains, though not as the best action possible. And this conclusion (or its opposite) is always required - it always occurs. To see from the nature of certain practices that one has a duty is not to see what it is best, without qualification, to do. Moral evaluation is invariably required, for action in the case of practice



keeping or breaking occurs only in the context of seeing some action as most desirable. And this is so regardless of the extremity of the circumstances.

What then of the possible non-fulfillment of a promise? Rawls seems to allow for the justifiable breaking of a promise, but is his view adequate for dealing with cases of conflicting obligations? He claims: 'The promiser is bound because he promised: weighing the case on its merits is not open to him.'<sup>1</sup> That to promise is to engender an obligation to do something is undoubtedly true. But it is equally true that this obligation is not absolute - it must be considered in relation to other existing obligations, or more generally, to other need-satisfying possibilities of the action-situation. Rawls insists that we limit the considerations involved to 'the various excuses, exceptions and defences, which are understood by, and which constitute an important part of the practice...'<sup>2</sup> Deliberation concerning cases where the obligation to keep a promise is not the decisive determinant of action is to be wholly in terms of the practice itself. It alone, it seems to Rawls, is sufficient to account for all exceptions. More directly, '... this sort of defence allowed by a practice must not be confused with the general option to weigh each particular

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1. Op. cit., p. 156.

2. Ibid.





case on utilitarian grounds...<sup>1</sup>

Is Rawls then saying that all moral dilemmas involving promises are solvable (if they are) by referring exclusively to the practice of promising? That is, does he really mean to exclude all considerations which involve something (such as utility) that lies beyond or is other ~~than~~ the practice of promising itself? And if so, does this in effect rule out any comparison of obligations where one arises from having promised to do something, and the other has its origin outside the practice of promising? Clearly, in an action-situation of this type the determination of what is most obligatory is required, yet it seems to distort matters to suggest that this can be determined only in terms of the practice of promising, and not in terms of the merits of the case. Must one not go beyond the practice to compare its merits in this case with the merits of some other action not in conformity with the keeping of a particular promise?

Either one can totally account for the justifiable breaking of a promise in terms of the practice of promising, or one must in fact compare the virtue (value) of breaking this promise with that of not breaking it at least partially in terms of an obligation which does not at all arise as part of the practice of promising. The first alternative -

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1. Ibid., p. 157.



which Rawls seems stuck with- amounts to nothing less than an inflation of the practice of promising to the point where a goodly percentage of moral claims other than those demanding the fulfillment of promises must be taken to lie within the practice of promising.

If, on the other hand, we cannot in moral matters be restricted to promising matters, and do not wish to conflate the two, this does not mean that whenever it is decisively wrong to fulfill a promise the practice does not allow for this non-fulfillment. The practice may in some sense or other, in some not too specific way, allow for all legitimate exceptions to its normal process. With Rawls we do not want to confuse this with the weighing of each case on its merits. They go together, but are not the same. They are not mutually exclusive, however, since to weigh each case on its merits is not to deny the practice of promising, but to deny that it is absolute, sufficient in itself for moral justification. A practice justifies an action falling under it only in the narrow sense that it counts as a case of that practice; for promises this includes the fact that it involves an obligation.

We cannot exclude moral evaluation from cases where a practice is involved. There are always other possibilities than that of keeping a promise; it would be misleading to include these possibilities as part of that practice. We must mediate between practices, not only when choosing to





embark upon one, but so long as the possibility of another exists. To think otherwise is to deny that the other exists as a possibility; it is to be deceived. Unless all of life is subsumed under the category of promise-keeping, so that there is nothing else of value in relation to that, we must assess the validity of an action which constitutes the keeping or breaking of a promise in terms of its value, as opposed to the value of alternative actions. If a practice has value, it is only because actions which constitute that practice have value.

Where does this leave Rawls' concern with asking for and giving '... a kind of promise which one often wants to be able to ask for and to give.'<sup>1</sup> Does the unavoidable assessment of each case on its merits, including cases involving promises, mean that no one can trust the man who realizes this fact? Do promises count for naught to him who knows that moral rightness counts for more than promise fulfillment? If promises serve to blind men to their action situations, then we must reject them as evil. But only those who hold a view like that of Rawls will be thus misled; they misread the place of the contradiction essentially involved in the practice of promising. Moral evaluation does not destroy the practice of promising, but its necessity reveals the inner contradiction of the latter. The future cannot be made today, though promises attempt to do so.

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1. Ibid., p.166.





Contrary to Rawls, the only feature of the practice of promising which allows for this justified non fulfillment of a particular promise is precisely the fact that it arises within a restricted system of practices, a fact which he attempts to use as the basis of its 'definitive' application for the guidance of action. That is, he reaches a conclusion directly opposite to the facts of the matter. That his conclusion is wrong reflects an unhappy opposition to the possibility of a utilitarian calculus vis-à-vis promise-keeping. Simply because promises do in fact create obligations, they need not be treated as absolute any more than any other obligations.

In fact, to treat promises as absolute in the way Rawls would have us do (i.e., as 'not allowing a general utilitarian defense'<sup>1</sup>), far from maintaining the possibility of asking for and giving 'a kind of promise which one often wants to be able to ask for and give'<sup>2</sup>, would be to dissolve the entire practice. If an action is justified by virtue of fulfilling a promise, that is, if we cannot in general question an action which fulfills a promise as to whether it is in fact the best action possible, then

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1. Rawls, op. cit., p. 166.

2. Ibid.



any action can be justified in advance merely by promising that one will do it. Rawls seems, in the end, to intuitively sense this absurdity involved in his position: 'It is my feeling that relatively few actions of the moral life are defined by practices ...'<sup>1</sup> If by 'defined' he means the sort of justification he claims for promise fulfilling actions, then we must insist that no obligations have this sort of a priori definition that lacks all regard for other action-situation possibilities.

It is not merely that, as the summary concept of rules (also outlined by Rawls) suggests, 'Each person is in principle always entitled to reconsider the correctness of a rule and to question whether or not it is proper to follow it in a particular case.'<sup>2</sup> Rather, one necessarily does this, however inadequately. To follow a rule is in fact to consider it correct; to be aware that it has a bearing on an action-situation by virtue of indicating a feature thereof is to raise the question of just how one might best follow it. Any rule whatsoever may in principle not only be incorrectly applied, but also correctly broken.

If moral principles are not absolute, what role do they play in moral evaluation? That is, if they allow and even presuppose moral evaluation, how are they used therein

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1. Ibid., p.170.

2. Ibid., p.166.





for the determination of how best to act? If principles are merely self-evident features of an action-situation, then clearly they are our starting point. If principles include any possible moral claim, they will still constitute part of the raw data of our inquiry, though awareness of all possible claims will only come with increased awareness of the action-situation. Principles are important for purposes of valid moral evaluation to the extent they indicate how to satisfy the needs of an action-situation; it is the best pattern of need-satisfaction we are left to determine in any case. If rules of any sort make this pattern more clear, then bravo for them; if they obscure or take the place of true understanding, then they should have no part in moral evaluation.

#### RESTRICTED EVALUATION

Since an action consists of many relations, it may be referred to by a number of descriptions. One does not, that is, completely encompass the reality of a particular action in any single reference to it. Therefore, one does not exhaust the reasons for or against an action by a single claim which refers to it as merely one of the many things which it is. So each possible action constitutes the basis for not only one prima facie claim about what in the given situation ought to be done, but as many as there are ways of referring to that action. Or twice as many,



since moral claims may or may not favor the action recognized by a particular description.

One important, highly useful type of moral claim is that provided by experts in the various spheres of human knowledge. The doctor's prescription of insulin (which we have already mentioned) is just one example. The lawyer we expect to know what to do in court, or what to do in order not to find ourselves there. The policeman's claims may also be relevant here. The economist tells us how and when to balance our budgets; the sociologist how to operate in groups. Experts such as these, and non-experts as well, advance endless claims about not only how one may act, but how one must act. What can be done, however, only may be what decisively ought to be done. Thus moral evaluation must sort out competing claims, see action possibilities in terms of need-satisfaction, and determine which possibility is the very best.

Experts exist in the various fields to determine specific kinds of needs. And successfully too, if the advance of applied sciences is any indication. The subjective component which is part of all knowledge does not lead to purely arbitrary results; a doctor's diagnosis generally is valid, even though it is his diagnosis. It is quite evident that physicians and psychiatrists are capable of evaluating one's physical and psychological needs in order to determine (correctly, one hopes) how



best to fulfill them. All too deadly ways of confirming diagnosis and prognosis attest to this fact.

It is not so evident that the total needs of an action-situation, and hence what is most needed (without qualification), is susceptible to the same sort of determination. But the doctor no more operates with single possibilities than anyone else concerned with establishing the best thing to do. Even though he restricts himself to medical considerations, to determining what it is medically best to do, there is still much for him to know, and much to be wrong about. He must understand how the patient functions, what particular symptoms of abnormal functioning are present, and not only diagnose but also prescribe a remedy. These all involve the assessment of alternatives which are never fully the same from patient to patient; therapeutic principles learnt in the classroom and elsewhere must be applied, and are applied in understanding and responding to actual medical conditions. This is the doctor's job: his task qua doctor is that of determining what is most necessary to best promote the health of his individual patients.

If we then consider the patient as an agent, we see that the doctor is concerned with the elucidation of the peculiarly medical needs of the patient's action-situation. And the doctor's advice, his claims qua doctor as to what is the best course of action (eg., 'Take this sedative.'),





may go a long way toward illuminating the dominant needs of an action-situation, and hence indicating the absolutely best or morally correct action. On the other hand, they may not. We might expect that they would, that the needs of a human being would be completely encompassed by the combination of psychological and physiological needs. But this expectation is contrary to our everyday experience, and for good reason. Though in a restricted sense human needs are confined to these areas, in point of fact the achievement of conditions satisfying needs so understood is a matter involving areas of knowledge in some cases quite remote from the medical practitioner. If taking the sedative is an action that is need-satisfying, then the manufacture of the sedative, other things being equal, is every bit as much need-satisfying.

Here again is a means/end distinction. The manufacture is a necessary condition for the prescribing, and the prescribing is a necessary condition for the taking. Pills must be manufactured in order for them to be consumed. It is not that either the manufacture or the consumption is more necessary - they are equally necessary. Both are needed by the agent (assuming the doctor, who is also needed to do the prescribing, is correct). The one does not make the other valuable, but in being valuable means that that which is its precondition is valuable as well. Abstracting means from ends and from the total con-



text in which they have value may be useful in understanding the way things are related, but in terms of moral evaluation may be misleading as well. The doctor may not be aware of it, but since ends are entirely their own means, for him to prescribe the sedative may be for him to promote the grinding up of back teeth from pregnant nanny goats and the enjoyment by a pharmaceutical manufacturer of a villa on the French Riviera. If the analytic fragmentation of reality is undertaken in order to better understand its features and their relationships, it is also the case that this fragmentation involves dangers of ignoring the relationships in favor of comfortable worship of things in themselves, ie., in abstractions.

It is precisely the job of moral evaluation to overcome this abstract thought, to see the way in which claims of various compartmentalized spheres of knowledge relate to one another in displaying the total pattern of possible need-satisfaction which an action-situation involves. It becomes moral evaluation as opposed to medical, or legal, or social, or political, or religious, or economic evaluation, the moment it ceases to respect the artificial, encapsulating<sup>1</sup> barriers created in the pursuit

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1. 'What do we mean by encapsulation? In general, we mean claiming to have all of the truth when one only has part of it. We mean claiming to have truth without being sufficiently aware of the limitations of one's approach to truth. We mean looking at life partially, but issuing statements concerning the wholeness of living.'  
J.R. Royce, The Encapsulated Man (Princeton, 1964), p.30.





and application of varieties of human knowledge. That is, the moment one takes as questionable the claims of any of these restricted disciplines in terms of it being unconditionally best to follow them, that moment one has begun the arduous search for what is best, not in terms of an economic situation, or medical situation, or whatever, but in terms of an action-situation. That is, in terms of a total human situation.

Our intent of course is not to denigrate or propose the elimination of medical concerns, or legal concerns, or any other limited sphere of knowledge. Rather, in the case of medical practice (as in the case of promising practice), we must remain constantly alert to the fact that what is most valuable medically may in fact be immensely contrary to the satisfaction of other human needs. The unscrupulous doctors at Auschwitz come to mind here. We are not, however, advocating a 'medical ethics', since this comes near to being a contradiction of terms. What we wish to avoid is any suggestion that unconditionally right action, ie., morally correct action, takes its cue from considerations arising within a limited profession or club of any sort. As Erich Fromm states in 'Medicine and the Ethical Problem of Modern Man':

... there is no such thing as medical ethics. There is only universal human ethics applied to specific human situations. If, on the other hand, we separate medical ethics from the universal problem of ethics, then there is danger that medical ethics might degenerate into a code which essentially serves the function of protecting the interests



of the medical guild against the patient.<sup>1</sup>

But to come back to the patient as agent - it is in terms of his action-situation that it is most important to be aware of the limited nature of medical evaluation. Even though sedatives are prescribed, the taking of one may not be the best thing to do, for instance, when vandals are clubbing one's children to death in the room below. The doctor's conclusion provides no more sanctity than a promise once made. Both must be evaluated in the context of all present needs. It is not that the medical claim, or the promise claim, are necessarily untrue, but that they are qualified claims presenting, even if true within certain bounds, only some of the total needs of an action situation. Whereas the moral conclusion that is constantly required by the agent qua agent is necessarily of an unqualified nature; he necessarily acts, not as an abstractly isolated patient or promiser, but as a concrete human being. Wisdom, rather than a certain brand of knowledge, is the goal of moral evaluation.

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1. In The Dogma of Christ and other Essays on Religion, Psychology, and Culture. Doubleday Anchor, 1966, p.176.



#### IV. Resources and Growth

##### ABILITY

In explicating the process of moral evaluation, we have seen that the quest is to determine which of all possible actions is the most needed, that is, which best satisfies the needs of an action-situation. This itself suggests that the correlate of need is an agent's ability applied in its satisfaction. Ability is applied to resources, which are thereby manipulated so as to best satisfy needs, and hence promote yet other human abilities. Both extra-human and human resources are transformed so as to render their new form more valuable.

A body that enjoys some degree of health is the most basic requirement for action. Without food, clothing, and shelter, which are sometimes referred to as basic needs, there is no question of an agent providing any response, let alone an extremely satisfying one. Being dead, he lacks any ability whatsoever. The paramount needs of an action-situation are thus those that sustain life; men, who constitute the ultimate source of all need, instinctively know this. Yet this too is somewhat inaccurate, since all satisfaction of need sustains life; rather, there are cer-





tain critical needs which, if unsatisfied, mean that there is no life of any sort to sustain. And hence no value.

This direct satisfaction of needs, this providing for the bare subsistence of men, is the most obvious source of value. As the sine qua non of human existence, and hence human ability, its moral primacy is self-evident. One may contrast the means of subsistence with the more indirect satisfaction of what may appropriately be called the means of production. Men utilize their primary ability to make themselves more able to meet yet other needs. Satisfactoriness is found in the putting together of or transformation of resources in such a way as to ultimately promote the lives of men, to make more available the resources required for them to meet their needs. The lives of men are not only promoted by the availability to them of the means of subsistence in the basic, critical sense, whether it be now or in the distant future. To augment, to increase the means of production, where what is to be produced are basic requirements for life, is to look to the future. But this is not all that may be produced for the satisfaction of men, whether now or in the future. There are less basic needs as well.

Whatever their level of complexity or sophistication, we nevertheless require the ability to meet our **needs** through the manipulation of available resources. Less obvious needs of men are still human needs, although the



importance of their satisfaction may be less than that of the more primitive, basic ones. The production of psychological states such as security, freedom from fear, love, trust, acceptance, joy, may be necessary for the best possible human life. These psychological resources may even constitute our ability to cope with vital human problems; it may be that successful moral evaluation presupposes them, even as it presupposes the more obvious conditions of viable health.

The point to be noted here is that our philosophical concern is not with the isolation of needs or the elucidation of their priorities. That is the job of moral evaluation, augmented by more restricted evaluation (eg., by psychologists). Our job is to demonstrate that attention to human needs (and their correlates, human abilities and other resources), attention to how the resources of the world may better promote human well-being, must be central to any moral evaluation, where this is understood to be concerned with how best to act. Food, clothing, and shelter may not in fact be the most crucial needs of men, but if not, this does not invalidate the philosophical points being made. The logic of moral evaluation - what it must necessarily involve in order to be that and not something else - is our concern, and any specification of human needs contained herein is merely for illustrative purposes, and hence to be treated as quite hypothetical.





## RESOURCES

What an agent can do is limited by (a) his basic physical features, (b) his understanding of the world, and of the relations his physical features have to the world, and (c) the stance of the world toward him. This latter factor might be called the availability of resources. Needless to say, moral evaluation which ignores any of these factors, even the second, will be a less than complete understanding of an action-situation. The second factor (understanding) is provided by the evaluation itself in the case where the agent is the evaluator. Whether he is or not, his understanding is an element affecting his ability to deal with the situation.

The satisfaction of needs by an agent presupposes him having some ability to act, and also presupposes the availability of some resources which he can manipulate in satisfactory ways. Men are never totally self-sufficient, for even the satisfaction of their own basic needs presupposes an action-situation which contains obtainable resources with which to satisfy these needs. These conditions in turn are not always (if ever) just there, in nature, but must be created by men. Working together, in relationship with one another, men seek to provide better conditions for need satisfaction. Divisions of labor arise, such that certain men are able to employ their developed skills to make available for themselves and others certain resources



necessary for the satisfaction of certain needs, and other men in other ways provide for other human needs.

Thus we see that an action-situation is not simply a man or even a group of men confronting nature, but is very largely determined by social forms. Because there is a scarcity of certain materials required for the satisfaction of human needs, societies operate with certain limitations on as well as aids for the utilization of resources. The scarcity itself imposes limitations, but the specific nature of these limits is socially determined (as the scarcity itself might be). For instance, only so much rubber can be produced in any one year, but the percentage of this which Australia uses will depend on quite other factors, and principally matters of human convention. In turn, the amount of this which is used to make automobile tires is again a limitation imposed by the forms of distribution developed by men. The number of tires produced is therefore a somewhat different matter from how many rubber trees can grow on an acre of land, particularly when men with their sophisticated industrial organization are able to utilize other resources (e.g., natural gas) in the manufacture of tires. This 'natural' resource is also limited, but the crucial factors of tire production are in fact human decisions about how best to use these resources.

By 'resources' we need not restrict ourselves only to 'natural resources' which politicians are wont to praise



even as they give them to those having the economic resources (money) necessary for their 'development'. Even modern rhetoric recognizes the capabilities of people as resources the development and utilization of which is of utmost importance. In point of fact, no elements of an action-situation which are capable of being transformed or having a transforming function can be a priori excluded from the realm of resources. Nothing in principle is utterly useless. Resources, that is, constitute the entirety of an action-situation, and the measure of the rightness of the way in which it is reshaped by action is the degree to which the action in transforming the resources promotes the satisfaction of needs.

## DEVELOPMENT

We do not come into the world with a full repertoire of need-satisfying abilities. They must be developed, and used. An infant is potentially many things, but what he will come to do well is only a small fraction of what he might have come to be able to do. That is, the activities of men are diverse, but the activities of any one man are not so diverse. What one's activities can be depends upon one's action-situation - right from the start. Resources must be available for the satisfaction of one's own basic needs, prior to any possibility that one will be able to act so as to satisfy some of the many other needs





which constitute one's action-situation.

If the concern of moral evaluation is to promote the lives of men, then it has human growth as its object, rather than stagnation or decay, which are clearly not desirable. Desirable human development can be carried far beyond that common to most organisms, which merely seek to maintain and enhance their bodily health. What a man can do, what he can become, is generally far from being exhausted by the primitive instinct for mere survival.

Education has human development as its object. Growth in understanding is a growth in one's ability to use one's primary ability in the best possible manner. Skills which may be developed are not limited to either the mechanical or the intellectual, but are generally a combination of both which enable one to effectively manipulate one's environment. Verbal or other linguistic skills may involve the use of one's hands (as in writing) even as much as the mechanic must use his. The surgeon is a man whose capacities are quite developed; he knows (hopefully) what he is doing, but only as the result of a long developmental process. Even as the surgeon has learnt to evaluate particular bodily needs, the mechanic may be good at satisfying the needs of a motorist by understanding what an engine requires for proper functioning.

With Plato we must insist that all men develop their capacities to the greatest extent possible. Capacities do



differ; certain men are able to learn to do certain things better than others. The resources necessary for this learning and hence necessary for the satisfaction of needs to which realized capacities will be applied, must be made available to all that can most effectively use them. Only by so doing can needs be best satisfied.

Capacities as merely potential themselves require development; men need to become what they only potentially are, not only that they may be something, but that the needs of all men which they can potentially satisfy may be actually satisfied. And when developed, they need to be used:

People with intelligence must use their intelligence, people with eyes must use their eyes, people with the capacity to love have the impulse to love and the need to love in order to feel healthy. Capacities clamor to be used, and cease their clamor only when they are used sufficiently. That is to say, capacities are needs ...<sup>1</sup>

If Maslow is correct here, then what we must primarily insure is that human capacities are not only allowed to develop, but that their utilization is also provided for. Education must include showing men the needs of men so that they may know what to do with themselves, with the capacities they are developing.

In a very real sense, a potentiality which cannot

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1. Abraham H. Maslow, 'Psychological Data and Value Theory', in New Knowledge in Human Values, edited by Maslow, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1959. P. 122.





be developed, an ability which cannot be used, and a need which cannot be met, do not even exist. To say one needs 'blas' when there is no such thing, is to say something quite unintelligible. To say one has an ability to teach children when there is no way open for one to do so, is to be somewhat confused about one's actual ability. The 'ability' remains a mere potentiality, of no substance whatsoever.

To frustrate the development and use of human abilities for the satisfaction of human needs is doubly wrong. Yet this is precisely what social systems sometimes do. Economic and political dimensions of social forms determine to a large extent what resources are available to whom and for what. They are thus crucial factors of any action-situation. They also can be common factors of many action-situations, hence influencing the need-satisfactions of many people over long periods of time. Their only justification is the need-satisfaction they actually produce, as opposed to that which they frustrate. This is the only justification for anything. But if social forms in fact thwart the application of abilities and other resources for purposes of satisfying actual needs, when they could be (and hence do) otherwise, then a mighty contribution toward the satisfaction of needs may be wrought by the transformation of these social forms themselves. To satisfy the needs of a few at the expense of the many



is simply wrong; right action cannot tolerate continued action situations of this sort, and must fight against them.

## FULFILLMENT

Historical circumstances set limits to what a man can become, and yet his very process of becoming plays a part in the making of history. Human agents collectively make history, and in doing so make themselves. Self development is thus an intrinsic aspect of action, and the growth which an action promotes (if it promotes growth) need not be only that of the agent. But, and this is crucial, it is invariably his as well. To act is to become, in acting, what one was only potentially prior to the action. It is to become one thing, rather than another. It is to take on a more definite form, to be what otherwise one merely might have been. This aspect - human fulfillment - is, all the same, no less a mixed phenomenon than are desires or needs themselves. Coercion and other similar features of an action-situation may mean that the ostensible agent is but a vehicle for the development of someone else. It may only minimally be his action, his making of history, his growth.

The measure of a man's true development is the need satisfaction he achieves. Potentially, he can come to have the value as a person which it is within his means to



achieve. Far from being a hindrance to his own self development, to further the satisfaction of the needs of others as well as himself is to make something more valuable of himself, to be significant to a degree otherwise impossible. This would seem, however, to be only half the story, since he may come to have a certain significance exceeding the value of a sound body alone by acting so as to deny or make more difficult the satisfaction of others (eg., the villainy of Hitler).

Great evil is of course significant, but, qua evil, not at all satisfactory. And it is not even possible to the extent that the agent successfully pursues moral evaluation. One cannot, that is, know what is most right for one to do, and not do it. What we know as desirable is what we desire, and hence pursue, unless 'desire' means something quite other than we have taken it to mean. (Cf. chapter II.) So our satisfactoriness as agents is our real satisfaction. And any other satisfaction we alone may feel (as our desires are met) is a result of our ignorance, the falsehood of our position, a result of the non-conformity of our desires to the needs of the action situations we face. It is a result, that is, of the inadequacy of our moral evaluation, or that of others whose conclusions we accept.

Human fulfillment is thus predicated upon a correct analysis of action-situations. To become our selves, to





live lives of greatest real satisfaction, to not waste away our lives, we who participate in the world of our action-situations must gain full awareness of what is most (i.e., morally) necessary. Moral evaluation seeks this awareness, awareness as to what, within the limits of our present capabilities, most promotes the satisfaction of human need. To secure the greatest balance of satisfied over unsatisfied need is at the same time for agents to fill themselves with the best possible substance. If true freedom is based on self-fulfillment, then the road to freedom is paved with knowledge, the knowledge of how best to live. The greater the satisfaction (of needs) promoted by the lives of men, the greater is the conformity of those lives to their objective requirements. And the more successful (truthful) are the evaluative conclusions which guide them.

This reference to men's lives, rather than particular action-situations in which moral judgment is directly applied, indicates that the satisfaction of needs which constitute the living of a good life is an ongoing process, a whole developing through time. And most importantly, it is a matter of immense interconnectedness, a matter of how men and things relate to each other. Appearances are not so much deceiving as overwhelming; direct perceptual awareness may lead us to underestimate that which is not directly seen. Though all action has its origin in the pursuit of the (apparently) desirable, it is



frightfully easy for our vision thereof, especially as agents, to be distorted by pressures of the immediately present. The immediately present, that is, tends to encompass one's total field of awareness. Principles providing continuity with the past are therefore a useful corrective. But above all, one must be future oriented. It is the future that's being made, and the future's a very long time.

In building the future, the overall problem is how to best fit capabilities to needs. How can present needs be satisfied so that future needs will also be satisfied? Neither is to be sacrificed for the other, since they are essentially interdependent. That which is (presently) needed will necessarily augment capabilities of the future; that which shall be needed is reconstituted by the capabilities of the present. It is wholly a matter of economy, satisfying needs that needs may be satisfied. Increasing capabilities, because their increase is needed. Because of the way things are, the way men are, we need to provide for future needs, the future optimistic meeting of action-situations.

Quite simply, the most valuable action is the one which is most valuable. If one is concerned with the right action, this is it! What the agent must most decisively and without qualification do is to render the greatest possible increase of value in the situation which





defines his capacity for action. By utilizing the resources of this action-situation in the most effective satisfaction of its needs, he attains the end of moral evaluation, virtue.



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